Moonlight in Miami: The Split Sociopolitical Reality of South Florida As Told By Barry Jenkins

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Abstract

This paper explores the sociopolitical implications and reflections of the 2016 film Moonlight*. By looking at the film with these considerations, and by contextualizing themes and moments from the film with contemporary scholarship and social data, this paper offers a clearer understanding of both the film and the city it takes place in—Miami. As sociological literature from the past thirty-odd years suggests, Miami has often been the site of both tense racial relations and progressive ideals in the face of mass migration. The city has historically been lauded as a model of inclusivity while, simultaneously, much of its population experienced inequality and discrimination. While this research indicates one sort of social history in Miami,* Moonlight *provides an additional perspective, from a marginal standpoint that has often been overlooked by academic research. By taking both of these perspectives into account, this paper hopes to illuminate how Miami as the progressive city of the future has so far failed to live up to these expectations, while also illustrating that such expectations are still within the realm of possibility.*

Introduction

Miami, as an object of academic and popular criticism in the last fifty years, has maintained a split personality. Despite a wide variety of aphoristic proclamations naming it a city of the future, stark cases of social injustice and racial tension persist. Miami is at times deemed cosmopolitan though also provincial. There is a Miami that has made huge strides of inclusivity in relation to the immigrant communities that exist there, as well as a Miami reckoning with decades of racial tensions. There is a littoral Miami, referred to as glitzy and glamorous (and white), as well as a landlocked, seemingly stranded Miami, seen as unglamorous (and black). The history of these Miamis, well-documented in popular publications and theorized about in academia, exemplifies a split personality. Croucher observes these personalities stemming from postmodern conditions, as the contradictory nature of Miami is prototypical of the coming age of twenty-first century cities. In her view, cities have entered a constant state of change, places of shifting terrains which impact the "inherently political and contextual nature of the social definition of reality" (1997, p. 14). In

other words, as cities continue to influence populations, and vice versa, both cities and populations will continue to develop socially, culturally and politically, in a sort of ideological calculus. Such a fluid existence, at least in the eyes of critics writing about Miami, indicates its role as an enigma compared to other cities. Croucher and other critics call into question the identity of Miami moving into and through the twenty-first century. These scholars indicate a difficulty in speaking about Miami as if grasping at straws, rendering the city a site of birth, combination, rebirth and transformation.

The 2016 film *Moonlight* similarly calls into question competing and ever-shifting conceptions of identities, such as racial identity, gender-normativity and sexual orientation. Drawing upon first-hand experiences growing up in Miami, the filmmakers contemplate the ways that geographies, histories, politics and mainstream narratives impact upon the unstable identities of both Miami and its residents. The film focuses upon a black, gay man, Chiron, from Liberty City in Miami, and his experiences as he grows from a young boy to a young man. The film is replete with allusions to his geographic context, and the ways in which that context interacts with various aspects of his identity in overlapping and intersecting ways. An awareness of both this geography and the critical discourse surrounding Miami's social history is crucial for a deep understanding of the film. This paper analyzes *Moonlight* as a film in and of Miami, a place capable of illustrating both instability in identity as well as a place of constant, radical identity formation and re-formation. By taking advantage of a setting in this city, the filmmakers tell a unique story that, like the city itself, gestures towards the future possibilities of identity formations on both individual and societal scales.

Miami

Miami's perception in both academic and popular critique is that of an enigma. As Marvin Dunn notes in *Black Miami of the Twentieth Century*, while Miami was reputed "as the rising star of the Western Hemisphere" in the 1980s, it was also in the throes of occasionally violent racial tension amidst several notable moments of mass insurrection from the late 1960s through the mid-1990s, to the point that "the city was declared in the national press to be the most racially torn city in the [U.S.]" (1997, p. 245). In the wake of the earlier riots, in 1968, local police officials went so far as to compare them to "firefights in Vietnam" as quoted in a New York Times article (1968). Dunn

writes, “For those who lived through the decade of fire [the 1980s], the psychological scars have been deep” (1997, p. 246).

Despite this tension, there existed a concurrent wake of positive criticism seemingly or willfully ignorant of the racial animosities and disparities. In a 1994 speech, President Bill Clinton spoke of the “Spirit of Miami,” a call to look forward through international struggles with a friendly, cooperative flair reminiscent of Miami and the productive talks there during the Summit of the Americas. He went so far as to call the summit “a moment when the course of history in the Americas changed for the better,” (Goshko, 1994). Alongside the Miami which was rife with racial tensions existed a Miami being lauded the world over as a multicultural city of the future. Croucher addresses this, writing that:

> Never too far removed from the glitz and glitter of the ‘American Riviera’ are the burning buildings and the broken glass of a ‘Paradise Lost.’ The multitude of metaphors that have been used to characterize Miami facilitate little more than the understanding that Miami is a city not easily understood (1997, p. 1).

As noted extensively by Dunn, as well as other critics such as Portes and Stepnik, Rose, and Croucher, Miami experienced an oft-misunderstood political and social transformation in the second half of the twentieth century. At once praised for the assimilation of over a million (primarily white) Cuban immigrants, the city was simultaneously home to a steep decline in the quality of life of other minority populations, most notably the black American and Haitian communities. That is to say that Miami is a city divided, a reality which affirms Croucher’s thesis that Miami is “a city without true substance, a state of mind instead of a state of being” (1997, p. 2). Miami is a city thoroughly of the postmodern world—a city disjointed politically, geographically and ideologically.

Numerous critics have observed Miami’s paradoxical structure. As Aranda, Hughes and Sabogal claim:

> [Miami] has been envisioned by Latinos/as friendly to Spanish speakers and Latin American/Caribbean traditions, and also as a place where immigrants can “make it,” an idea propagated by the success stories of the first waves of Cuban immigrants. Yet, at the same time Miami houses complex social hierarchies that sort immigrants’ life chances unequally and reflect Miami’s bimodal economic structure, U.S. racial ideologies and geopolitical projections, and cultural norms transplanted from places of origin (2014, p. 4).

This view is bolstered by data from recent decades regarding the uneven educational

opportunities throughout Miami-Dade County. Dunn cites a plethora of statistics to illustrate the disparity in educational opportunities and outcomes for black Americans compared to the rest of the population in Miami. As he notes, many attempts at integration throughout the second half of the twentieth century became engrained in inequitable outcomes; busing for out-of-district students, a method used to circumvent the problem of housing segregation, became so segregated itself that in 1985, 19,000 of the 23,000 students being bused to school in Miami were black, while at the same time 94% of private school students were white (1997, pp. 234-236). This stands in stark contrast to the reality for the growing population of "Cuban exiles and their children [who]," as noted by Rose, "gained privileges in areas in which African Americans continued to face discrimination, particularly education" (2015, p. 217). Rose continues:

> The state legislature and Dade County School Board persistently sought ways to deny black children access to [primarily white] public schools while they willfully admitted exiled Cuban children (2015, p. 217).

Such educational differences continue on into the twenty-first century, as Johns Hopkins' Center for Social Organization of Schools has recorded (Greenlee, 2008). Dade County shows a greater number of "dropout factories" in primarily black sections with an overall dropout/transfer rate of 80% for black students. Similarly, Dade County School Board statistics from the 2005-2006 school year show a 67% graduation rate for white students and a 43% rate for black students (Dade County School Board, 2013). One of the direst examples of this comes from the primarily black area of Miami known as Liberty City, home to *Moonlight*'s main character, and home as well to Miami Northwest High School, which posted a retention rate (rate of first year secondary school students who graduated from that school) of only 36% in the same school year compared to rates well into the 80s and 90s for primarily white areas of the county.

Moonlight

Dunn's and Aranda et al.'s juxtapositions of these Miamis uncover the thread of at-odds views of Miami: both a cosmopolitan city of the twenty-first century and a city-in-progress, struggling to deal with the reality of unequal access to political and educational opportunity. These disparities in Miami's public education illustrate that the realities of everyday life in Miami are notably different for black populations compared to white populations. Simply, to live in Miami and be black is fundamentally different than to live in Miami and be white. While, Dunn indicates, the

world was focused primarily on the glitzy figuration of Miami, a new symbol of the Western Hemisphere, there were lives being lived in other parts of Miami that unveiled an entirely different reality. The reality of life in this other Miami during the span of the late 1990s and early 2000s is one of the primary focuses of *Moonlight*.

Both director Barry Jenkins and the original playwright Tarrel McCraney were brought up in social contexts similar to those portrayed in the film. *Moonlight* is rooted in the same reality depicted by Dunn and ignored by much of the world. Jenkins has been quoted in a number of interviews acknowledging the importance of the film's setting:

> The film's setting is crucial. It takes place during the war-on-drugs era because that was a key part of my childhood—I was poor and black and my mom was an addict ("Director Barry Jenkins...", 2017).

This is not only the personal history of Jenkins as well as McCraney, but also of the main character of the film, Chiron, who the audience watches in three distinct parts of his life, each approximately six years apart. The first two sections in particular, "Little" and "Chiron", paint a picture of what life was like in the underrepresented area of Miami that existed in the shadows of the global city down the street.

The filmmakers throughout illustrate the instability of Chiron's life. The first scene shows a young Chiron running away from a group of bigger boys, ducking into what we later learn to be a "crack house": where (typically) poorer people come to buy and consume drugs. Chiron locks himself in until the boys chasing him disappear, at which point Juan, an adult, breaks through the plywood-covered window and helps to calm the frightened boy. Chiron, though perhaps scared of Juan's demeanor—not dissimilar to those Chiron was running away from—accepts Juan's help silently and tentatively. In this brief opening sequence, we see Chiron as a scared and shy little boy, completely unlike the suave and masculine Juan who, as revealed later, is a drug dealer. This is in line with Dunn's analysis of the late twentieth-century reality for young black Miamians, who looked "to the drug dealer as the neighborhood role model and mentor" (1997, p. 338). It is at this point that the viewer learns the film will be crucially centered in the context of the War on Drugs, and the characters' lives will be intertwined with that social reality. This is made only clearer when, later on, we find out that Chiron's mother is addicted to crack-cocaine and, moreover, is supplied by the boy's new-found hero—Juan.

The film, however, refuses to rely upon stereotypes of Juan as a black drug dealer from Miami.

His character is portrayed from the first moments of the film as caring and respectful towards Chiron, departing from both Chiron's and the viewer's expectations. Juan even assumes a fatherly air around the young boy, who clearly cares for Juan, especially because Juan allows him to escape geographically from Liberty City and thereby leave behind the space he grew up in and has come to fear. In Liberty City, Chiron is faced with constant antagonism, both from peers at school and from his mother at home. Juan and his home become a place of refuge for Chiron, as indicated when Chiron unexpectedly shows up one day at Juan's home seeking comfort away from the difficulties of his life in Liberty City, including his tenuous relationship with his mother. Wordlessly, the next shot is of the two arriving at the beach: the sound of the tide roaring loudly indicates that they are a long way from where Chiron lives. While at the beach, Juan performs a sort of baptism of Chiron—literally teaching him how to swim, figuratively teaching him about masculinity and racial identity. This baptism illustrates the trust that Chiron places in Juan; even though Chiron does not know how to swim, he still agrees to let Juan protect and teach him in the rough waters. Juan actively cares for Chiron, whom he identifies as a fellow outsider. Chiron is an outsider because of his burgeoning queer sexuality; Juan is an outsider as a black Cuban in Miami. Chiron's anxiety is conveyed through the partial submersion of the camera, which, like Chiron himself, is barraged by the waves, imparting a sense of near-drowning. Such visual tumult is mitigated only by Juan's guidance and instruction, providing a steady hand to stand strong against the tide.

After such a frightful yet empowering experience, Juan delivers a brief monologue that is the film's first direct comment on racial identity. Juan says that there are a "lotta black folks in Cuba; wouldn't know that being here though." He is comparing his childhood as a boy in Cuba with his experience as an adult in the U.S., a place where white Cubans have been warmly accepted and integrated, while black Cubans are forgotten and seemingly erased. This reality is also affirmed by Dunn and others, who note that there has been an apparently smooth transition for white Cubans into Miami (aided by the help of the Border Patrol when found at sea). This is a stark contrast to the experiences of black Cubans and black people from other Caribbean countries such as Haiti, who were not considered welcome in South Florida (as evidenced by the fact that Border Patrol would deport them before reaching the U.S.). The assimilation of white Cubans is held up as the success story of multicultural Miami; invariably ignored are the experiences of black people living in the city, experiences shown by the filmmakers and substantiated by the disparity in educational

outcomes as discussed above.

The filmmakers also shot *Moonlight* so that the audience feels destabilized not only by the contrasts of the plot, as the instability of Chiron's life is shown through his inability to fit in at home and at school, but also by the cinematography and audio profile. Throughout the film, there are many shots in which the subject is in focus, but the rest of the shot is blurry, even sometimes shaking. When Chiron enters school, fearful of what torment he faces inside the doors, the school appears to be quaking around him. When he enters his home with the expectation of an inevitable disagreement with his mother—and, at times, outright abuse from her—the room appears to be shaking as well. This evokes a feeling of tense nervousness in the viewer, mirroring Chiron's own fears. As he walks around his neighborhood and city, the camera projects the outside world as a blur of discomfort and muted colors, sometimes to the point of being unrecognizable. These techniques render the film jarring for its audience, thereby communicating the instability of Chiron's living conditions. Furthermore, the filmmakers portray both homes where Chiron lives with his mother to be dark, and cavernous: not in their size, but in their appearance of being closed off from the rest of the world. These dark homes signal Chiron's fear and solitude, a far cry from the bright spaciousness and welcoming nature of Juan's home and later the home of Juan's girlfriend, Teresa, to say nothing of the welcoming openness of the beach. Such radical juxtaposition between these spaces again enhances the viewer's understanding of Chiron's childhood as saturated with disorienting, confusing environments and signals clearly his attempts to escape those spaces.

The same sense can be culled from the soundscape of the film. When walking around near his home in Liberty City, the sounds of dogs barking, people fighting, inaudible but aggressive conversations, and police sirens dominate the background audio, thereby invoking an additional stress-inducing companion to the out-of-focus cinematography. The viewer is thereby forced to be tense when Chiron is tense. The filmmakers illustrate that Chiron is more at ease, or escaping mentally from this world, when the sounds of the ocean take over the speakers, or when the sounds of his neighborhood are drowned out by the classically-inspired musical score. When Chiron is at ease, the viewer can be at ease.

The comparatively calming sounds of the tide crashing into the shore, or of water being drawn for a bath and lightly disturbed by the bather, indicate, too, a central motif of the film: water as a

source of renewal, rebirth, and catharsis. This is first experienced when Juan and Chiron visit the beach together and Juan teaches him to swim. Throughout the rest of the film, Chiron is seen to perform similar quasi-religious rites. In the film's first chapter, after a sexually charged moment at school makes Chiron visibly uncomfortable and confused, he goes home and draws himself a bath. Later in the film, there are several instances of Chiron filling a sink with ice and water and splashing it all over his face, each time taking care to look at himself in the mirror so that both he and the audience can see the changes he has undergone. This moment is particularly poignant after Chiron is made the victim of anti-gay violence at school. As he walks out, a bully, Terrel, commands Chiron's friend and recent (secret) lover, Kevin, to "Hit his fag ass." Afterwards, with blood and cuts all over his face, Chiron is framed close up, using the sink to wash his blood away, and to symbolize as well a transition from his childhood fear to his mature confidence. This ritual, now presented to the audience for a third time, signifies Chiron's attempts to cleanse himself. In the following scene, he walks into school aggressively, his gait more reminiscent of Juan's than his own. He silently puts his backpack down, and then hits Terrel over the head with a chair.

Chiron is shown, immediately after exacting his revenge on the bully, being arrested and forced into a police cruiser. The scene is given renewed meaning when compared to a discussion from after the original incident with Terrel, when a school administrator attempts to get Chiron to press charges. "If you don't press charges," she tells Chiron, "we can't stop this from happening." She continues, "if you were a man there'd be four other knuckleheads sitting right next to you," signaling from an authority figure that Chiron's reluctance to comply with the school's disciplinary system is a sign of cowardice. As this new iteration of masculinity is presented to him, which directly contrasts with his lessons from Juan, Chiron looks incredulous. The viewer, then, is forced to understand what Chiron already knows—the legal system, broadly conceived to include school administrators, is not there for *his* protection. Chiron was attacked at the command of a bully who had previously done the following: called Chiron a faggot; insulted Chiron's mother by suggesting he (Terrel) had had sexual contact with her; and made a snide comment in class about Chiron needing to change his tampon. The final of these occurred in front of a teacher, a supposed authority figure, who did little to stop the exchange.

With such confusing conceptions of manliness around him, it is all but natural for Chiron to be doubtful of what the school administrator was saying to him—the system had already failed him. In his world, in which he had been attacked by almost everybody in his life for being gay and

treated, often, as less than a person, what could this administrator know about what it means to be a man, or know how a man should handle such a problem? In his reality, to go into the school and take matters into his own hands is, for Chiron, an act of agency, a way of telling himself and those around him that he is indeed a person and that he will indeed stick up for himself even if others refuse to act on his behalf. A victim of verbal and physical violence within his local community (a community marginalized within the city of Miami), Chiron is further marginalized when he is unable to partake in the established legal realm, shown by his disdain for pressing charges at the school administrator's behest. In less formalized terms, he is unable to fit in, confide in and gain protection from his peers. Unprotected by both the law (as a black American) and his peers (as a queer black man), Chiron suffers a crisis in which he himself takes his protection into his own hands, and ends up being arrested for it. Mere hours after one of the few intimate moments of Chiron's life, when he shared a tender, meaningful sexual exchange with Kevin, that same person betrayed him. Chiron is marginalized from even the margins, and feels it necessary to take matters of protection into his own hands in a jarring moment that rejects the logic of his school's administrator.

To refer to Portes and Stepnik, these kinds of marginalizations within the black community are historical hallmarks of racial identity in Miami, as factions within black populations have divided themselves. As they write:

> A tangle of conflicting and often contradictory perceptions, attitudes, and interactions yielded a confusing scene where racial solidarity alternated with class and ethnic factionalism as well as economic competition…[that contributed to] a growing process of differentiation in the black population of Miami (1993, p. 178).

As evidence, Portes and Stepnik refer to the riots of Miami in the 1980s, claiming that, though the riots themselves were inspired by poor black communities from places like Liberty City, the political establishment of Miami preferred to convene with middle class and wealthy black community leaders who, at first, resisted those very acts of insurrection. Similarly, other lines have been drawn within the black community, such that queer black individuals like Chiron are thoroughly excluded from the mainstream black community and doubly excluded from society at large. This indicates not a monolithic community of black Americans in Miami, which is perhaps the assumption of those outside black populations, but rather one that is schismatic, as portrayed by the violence against Chiron during the film.

Moonlight is rife with symbolism that illustrates the sectarian nature of the black community of Miami and highlights the difficulties of growing up poor and black in Miami at that time. It goes on to show how growing up in this context can lead to social and political marginalization, as well as alternative forms of migration that include more than the global migration which Miami became known for at the same time. In particular, the film takes as its subject various forms of migration: most notably, the migration of people from school to prison and from prison back to society, and the movement of marginalized people to further margins. Chiron's story intersects with these issues when, seeking retribution for hateful violence against him in the method that presented itself to him, he is sent to prison for an indeterminate amount of time, after which we join him in the film's third chapter.

Such racial and class-driven disparities call into question Miami's burgeoning role as a global city. Taking into account both the spirit of cosmopolitanism that Clinton praised and the less "glitzy" underbelly geographically associated with places like Liberty City, what is Miami's role as a player on both the American and global geopolitical stages? Will Miami be a melting pot that illustrates that countries are capable of assimilating foreign immigrants in the era of globalization and massive migratory movements, or rather the scene of some of the most atrocious racial disparities in a country replete with racial-atrocities?

Amidst a city with so confusing an identity as Miami, *Moonlight* asks the audience to contemplate what other kinds of split personalities are better viewed, in line with Croucher's work, as splintered, postmodern-influenced identifiers as opposed to clear-cut, black and white truths. As Croucher writes:

> Use of the categories "black," "Cuban," "Jewish," and "Anglo," assumes the existence of easily identifiable groups with shared interests and fails to recognize that the labels themselves mask a variety of distinct social identities that crosscut and overlap ethnicity (1997, p. 159).

The film does well to juxtapose competing conceptions of identity—Miami both as the drug-stricken city that Chiron grew up in, and the coastal Miami that Chiron comes to identify as a place of acceptance and rebirth. At the same time, Chiron is continuously confronted with competing conceptions of what it means to be black, male and queer by confounding the expectations of each of those adjectives.

In her paper "Doing *Fake* Masculinity, Being *Real* Men", Ford establishes a sort of baseline for

the black male identity that Chiron appears to be grappling with. By interviewing a number of black, male subjects, she extrapolates some of the apparently definitive traits that they use to define black masculinity. She claims that:

> …doing black masculinity is personified in a dark-skinned, athletic, intimidating figure who achieves and maintains status and peer approval through money, material possessions, attention from women, and tales of heterosexual encounters (2011, p. 44).

Ford suggests this persona is often achieved via a "thuggish demeanor" (2011, p. 44), and that, accurate or not on a larger scale, this portrayal is the reality proffered by black men in her study. As such, it is useful to consider for a moment how this plays out in the film.

In many ways, Juan emulates these traits. He asserts authority over those that work beneath him in the drug trade. He walks with temerity compared to Chiron's bashfulness, and undeniably lives his life with heteronormative assumptions, as he exhibits via subtle suggestions throughout the film. However, when Chiron as a young child confronts Juan with questions about sexuality in the wake of being seen differently by peers and even his mother, Juan does not follow through with the expectations set out by Ford. Though originally taken aback by Chiron's question about being gay, Juan does not respond negatively, though he shares a silent, telling glance with his girlfriend. Rather, he defends Chiron's burgeoning queer identity and tells him not only is it acceptable to be gay, but that it has no bearing on Chiron's status as a man. A man, to Juan, is not, therefore, someone who is exactly like him, nor the "thug" stereotype illustrated by Ford. Rather, it is someone who demands respect. In Juan's words: "You could be gay but you can't let anybody call you no faggot." This sets a clear distinction between identifying as queer, which Juan defends, and allowing people to oppress you because of your character, which Juan tells Chiron is unacceptable. Juan thereby confounds the viewer's assumptions by supporting Chiron, but at the same time frames his support from a perspective of reductive heteronormativity. Being a man is not about being strong and straight to Juan, but about unapologetically being and standing up for oneself. However, that Juan does not fully understand the systemic nature of Chiron's oppression is evident in the fact that following this advice leads to Chiron's arrest and jailing.

The film here comes into conversation with historical representations of black men over the past century, as in Andrew Leiter's figuration. Here, we see Chiron acting as the U.S. imagination largely expects him to act—remorselessly and illegally violent. This is reminiscent of Leiter's "black beast" image, a trope "developed slowly out of slavery and crystallized in white minds over

the last decade of the nineteenth century" (2010, p. 3). Though Leiter's work concerns media produced closer to the beginning of the twentieth century, it is applicable here, as he acknowledges, inasmuch as this image has been subverted in order to challenge racist assumptions about black Americans that have persisted beyond the supposed fall of Jim Crow. In many ways, the violent manner in which Chiron seeks to defend himself calls attention to the fact that, though the formalized legal framework of Jim Crow has disappeared, it has not been replaced by a framework that adequately defends the rights of black American populations, and forces black populations to often take matters into their own hands. This is exemplified by Chiron circumventing legal recourse in favor of personal violence against a bully, and harkens back to similar situations wherein black populations have forgone established institutional frameworks in favor of personal or community-led action.

For instance, organizations like Black Lives Matter (BLM) have sought alternative routes to change the law in the lineage of activists such as Martin Luther King, Jr., whose role as quasi-advisor to presidents in the 1960s helped to bring about the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and whose death brought about the Civil Rights Act of 1968. It was only after nearly a decade of democratic demonstration in U.S. public spaces that King was able to garner such a role though. BLM has likewise favored taking to the streets to voice their political aspirations, and used other extra-institutional methods, in stark opposition to police and to the chagrin of swaths of white American populations who see groups like BLM as antithetical to their vision of the U.S., a vision steeped in a revised history that cherishes piecemeal parliamentary action and political niceties. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" affirms this point: "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed…For years now I have heard the word 'Wait!' It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" It is important here to note several points: (1) the legislative success of King's movement for civil rights was the direct outcome of years of extra-institutional organizing; (2) the changes brought about by those pieces of legislation did not lead to the widespread black liberation they were meant to; and (3) racial disparity in the U.S. persists to this day. These points are confirmed by the very existence of the BLM movement, as black Americans are forced time and again to mobilize themselves in lieu of being able to exercise traditional political power and without the protection of the state.

Chiron's story is a case in point of national issues, and *Moonlight* asks viewers to consider for themselves the status of race relations in the U.S., as it tells the story of a boy (and then a man) who is unable to rely on institutionalized frameworks for protection. This detail is also crucial when considering the lack of political representation available to Chiron. As a child, Chiron had little support from the people who are supposed to raise him and be his community, with the sole exceptions of Juan and his close friend Kevin. As an adult, Chiron is forced to navigate political and social realities in a similar manner, attempting to navigate a harsh, racist world on his own as an ex-convict (a third marginalizing factor in his identity), in a manner not unlike the social movements described above. Chiron, seeing injustice right in front of him, is forced to take matters into his own hands throughout the film and claim justice for himself, which mirrors the mobilization of BLM in the wake of a series of murders of black Americans at the hands of U.S. police since 2013. While Juan endeavours to show Chiron a Miami in which one is able to create themselves, even those marginalised from the margins, like Juan himself, Chiron still sees a city and a state that does not seem to want him.

In the wake of his arrest, incarceration and movement back into society, it can be assumed that Chiron was subject to an issue which has come to the fore recently in Florida—the denial of former convicts the right to vote in elections. Though this reality is not brought up in the film, it figures in that Chiron was more likely than not denied the right to vote because of a retaliatory mistake he made as a child, effectively silencing the political voice of someone who is most in need of political support. Had Chiron come from a more inclusive or entitled context, or had he simply gone to one of Miami-Dade's more successful schools, such attacks on his masculinity and sexuality would have been less likely, and his punishment would perhaps have been handled within the confines of the school and not the law, had the situation arisen at all. According to the Sentencing Project, there are currently six million Americans barred from voting because of a felony conviction, more than half of whom have completed their sentences entirely—including parole and probation (2016). One can look at the extreme case of Florida, in which more than one fifth of black Floridians are unable to vote, either due to explicit, institutionalized disenfranchisement or the many cases in which it is unnecessarily extended due to poor intra-governmental communication or laborious difficulty in the reinstitution process. As such, there is a large number of Americans who are not represented politically, including Chiron. If Chiron's violent outburst against Terrel is figured as a method of self-protection due to a lack of protection by other agents, then his ensuing

disenfranchisement only serves to further marginalize him from institutional protection and representation.

The lessons learned from Juan during the beginning of the film, and affirmed by Kevin in the middle and final chapters, are not merely encouraging Chiron to express himself in alternative ways. Chiron also views these lessons as permission: that no matter what you hear from other individuals, or from society at large, and no matter the myriad ways in which you are silenced by the context in which you exist, to exist itself is a radical act. At the end of the film, Kevin asks, "Who is you?" to which Chiron replies, after hesitating, "I'm me. I ain't trynna be nothing else." He had already confounded Kevin's expectation of who he would be several years after last they saw each other. Chiron, considering Kevin's question after years of questioning himself, has settled on an answer at last. Kevin, as evidenced by the non-gendered question "Who you doing?" in reference to Chiron's romantic involvements, had not expected the oldest version of Chiron we see in the film to be a re-creation of Juan (hyper-masculine, drug dealer), but rather the same quiet, queer boy he remembers. But Chiron does not shy away from himself—he embraces both his new self as a self-proclaimed "trapper" as well as his queer self, confounding Kevin's expectations of what it means to be a "thug," to return to Ford's language, and what it means to be queer by simply being both of those things.

When the two men ride in the car together, the audience hears a song called "Classic Man" blaring over the stereo. At first, it seems that the song symbolizes Chiron's denial of his queerness and the thick, tough exterior he has put on as a façade. This is transformed when Kevin asks Chiron a sensitive question about his sexuality. Chiron replies by turning the music louder as the chorus comes on, seeming to answer Kevin's question by proxy, telling Kevin "I'm a classic man," shirking assumptions about who he should be and updating the notion of what a classic man is. Moments later, Kevin and Chiron lay together in the same position they did years earlier, after their first sexual exchange in Kevin's apartment by the water, as Chiron drifts to sleep with the din of the crashing surf in the background, combined with a soft classical melody. These sounds combine to remind the viewer of earlier times in Chiron's life when he felt at ease. The final shot is the dream of the twenty-something Chiron: the young Chiron of the first chapter standing on the beach, his hideaway, presumably the day he first went with Juan. This last moment suggests a future of acceptance and inclusion for Chiron, who has finally made it back spiritually to the same shores at which he was baptized by Juan and Kevin in different ways, and left behind the obscure

dreams of his past. Chiron is once again taken in by Kevin in the third chapter, and he is finally able to stay in the part of Miami that was never meant for him: the Miami of radical identity formation, reformation and transformation, where water (the site of each of these agency-defining moments) is the primary interlocutor. At all of these distinct moments, the sound of the waves inveterately crashing blares.

Conclusion

Croucher acknowledges both Miamis in her work on the city—in short, white Miami and black Miami. But her main thrust suggests that this division is not indicative of an order that is set in stone, but rather subject to constant revision. As she posits:

> Ethnic groups in modern settings are constantly recreating themselves, and ethnicity is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host society (1997, p. 15).

Moonlight is indicative of a changing social and ethnic reality. Little attention has been paid to films with only black actors, especially stories of queer black people; this one not only received popular notice and critical acclaim, but even won the most prestigious awards in the film industry. The context of Chiron's youth has been transformed, and reform has been called for and approved, as voters in the state of Florida elected in 2018 to reinstate the voting rights of former felons *en masse*. While this suggests a changing tide, racial disparities persist. After all, despite *Moonlight*'s great success, perhaps the most famous image associated with the film is the mistake at the Academy Awards, in which *Best Picture* was incorrectly awarded, at first, to *La La Land* (Berman, 2017). Even in this triumphal moment for the film, it was symbolically outshined by a film which affirms the domination of white Hollywood—a domination further consolidated by the creators of *Moonlight* being sequestered during their time to speak. Furthermore, despite the referendum on felon voting rights being approved by the public, conservative politicians in Florida have resisted such legal development, effectively quashing the will of the statewide electorate in favor of the racially-exclusionary status quo (Mazzei, 2019; Bazelon, 2018).

In line with Croucher, though, this film indicates that the relationship between Miami and the black people that live there has changed in the decades even since Croucher wrote her book, and that, with this reformation, the city has been remade as well, from a city awash in racial tensions and disparity to a city in which Chiron is able to feel at home in a neighborhood that was once not

for him. Chiron has taken it upon himself to stake his claim, so to speak, taking agency in his own life and reforming the opinions of those around him. The film gives voice to an often-marginalized identity and enables Chiron to form and reform his own identity in a way that is newly possible in a city known the world over as a bastion of equality and identity-making. Perhaps, finally, the Miami that President Clinton and others noted for its inclusivity, and for its model as a city of the future, is accessible to those who have been perennially excluded because of their class, education, sexual orientation or race. Perhaps, finally, the city associated with an ability to seal one's own fate will finally extend that same right to natives and immigrants alike, no matter which neighborhood or country they grew up in. Though this reality is likely still decades in the future, *Moonlight,* much like the city itself, allows us to imagine both the Miami of the past, in all its complexity, disparity and racial tensions, as well as the Miami of the future, and the possibility therein for all the people who live there. *Moonlight* is both reflective of the Miamian context, while also having an impact on Miami's reality.

The sociopolitical tide in Miami is, without question, retreating from the reality described by Dunn, Portes and Stepnik and others. Though there are certainly still disparities in class, sexual orientation and race, strides in the right direction illustrate that *Moonlight* is reflective of Miami's past, present, and, potentially, future. Miami, too, is reflective of *Moonlight*. Croucher notes that every context is changed even by portrayals of that context (1993, p. 14). *Moonlight* can help the audience not only identify scarcely told stories of Miami's past and judge for themselves the reality of Miami in the present, but also to get a sense of what Miami might become should the characters of the film not be the exception but the norm. By allowing people to shirk expectations of what they are supposed to be, perhaps in a Miami of the future Chiron would not have to try to live up to the expectations put forth by Ford, and perhaps it would not be extraneous of Juan to break free of those expectations. Similarly, perhaps it would become the norm in Miami, and the world over, that people could choose their lives for themselves outside of the constraints of class, race, sexual orientation or any other such identifiers.

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